

“Allied in the Pursuit Academic Excellence”

Annual Dinner of the
Alliance of Distinguished and Titled Professors

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President

Indiana University

Tudor Room

Indiana Memorial Union

Bloomington, Indiana

September 24, 2007

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Fred. Laurie and I are delighted to be with you this evening. I really am deeply moved and greatly honored to be elected to this august body. I am especially honored to be the first sitting president accorded this singular privilege.

I have long been allied with you, the intellectual leaders of Indiana University, in the unflagging pursuit of academic excellence. Thank you very much for making that alliance official this evening. It is frankly one of the greatest honors I have ever received.

1.1 A KEENLY FELT ABSENCE

Even as I express to you my pleasure at being welcomed into this illustrious community of scholars, we mourn the absence of our colleague Henry Besch. In various capacities over the last decade, Henry guided the activities of the Alliance with an unflinching

commitment to its most enduring purpose—to defend, sustain, and advance academic excellence.

We all, once again, extend our heartfelt condolences to Henry’s wife Frankie, his son Kurt, his daughter-in-law Renae, and other members of the Besch family. We are glad Frankie, Kurt, and Renae can be here this evening. We all consider ourselves supremely fortunate to have known and worked with Henry. He is greatly missed.

2. ACADEMIC DISTINCTION

In this, my first speech to the Alliance as president of Indiana University, I want to endorse, as emphatically as I can, the incisive sentiments of my illustrious predecessor, Herman B Wells when he said: “the first task of the academic administrator is to try to attract and hold the most talented faculty members, support them . . . and encourage them to go wherever their talent and energy lead them.”

This is the quintessence of what my job, and those of all of my administrative colleagues, is all about. The talents and energies of IU’s distinguished and titled professors have historically been at the core of Indiana University’s greatest achievements in education and research. And they continue to be so.

2.1 SUPERLATIVE RECOGNITIONS OF EXCELLENCE

Over the years, Indiana University’s community of dedicated and outstanding scholars has included or been associated with 7 Nobel Prize winners, 7 Pulitzer Prize winners, 5 MacArthur Fellows, and currently includes over 30 active and emeritus members of the National Academies and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The IU Bloomington campus alone has been home to more than 210 winners of the Guggenheim Fellowship, dating back to 1939 when microbiologist Leland McClung was recognized for his contributions to the study of anaerobic bacteria. And gathered in this room this evening are some of the most distinguished scientists, scholars, artists, and teachers in the world as recognized by their peers.

At the end of the day you, and your accomplishments, are the essence of this great university.

2.1 RESEARCH ACCOMPLISHMENTS

But let no one say that IU's days of greatest glory and superlative research accomplishments lie in the past. The sponsored research totals that I announced on Friday at the Board of Trustees meeting tell an entirely different story.

During fiscal year 2007, Indiana University faculty were awarded a total of over \$433 million in externally sponsored awards to support their research and service activities. Most research at Indiana University is funded this way, and over half of these funds come from the federal government. This figure is the second highest fiscal year total in the university's history. It marks an increase of nearly 3% over the sponsored research totals for FY 2006.

But we must not grow complacent. Though our overall figure is up, the federal component continues to decline. This reflects the stagnant NSF and NIH budgets for the past few years, an increase in the number of proposals submitted to these agencies, and a decline in the success rates of these proposals. In 2000 one in three proposals was funded. In 2006, only one in five was funded.

Much of what we have to do in the next four years will be directed at stemming and reversing this decline.

But let us, at the same time, never forget that research is more than just knowledge creation. It is more than coming up with the latest technical innovation. It is more than new art, dance, and drama. At its best, research ultimately teaches us new lessons about the physical and metaphysical universe. It recognizes problems in the world and seeks to solve those problems. It imagines opportunities and makes them a reality. Simply put, the agendas of discovery pursued by the scholars, scientists, and artists gathered in this hall tonight make the world a better place. And this is the mission of a great public research university like IU.

3. CHALLENGES

But to achieve this mission it is essential that we provide the infrastructure and service that our best researchers and artists need “to go wherever their talent and energy lead them,” as Wells put it.

This means developing a master plan and constructing at least some of the 5 million square feet of research space that will be needed on this campus and at IUPUI over the next two decades. This means improving and expanding the administrative services that support world-class research. This means ensuring that while we advance the life sciences we also sustain and enhance the role of the arts and humanities. This means aggressive and skillful fundraising. It means sustaining and enhancing the intellectual atmosphere that will enable us to retain excellent faculty while continuing to attract the next generation of new stars.

I will describe strategies for how we will achieve each of these goals in my inaugural address in about a month’s time.

4. A COMMITMENT TO RENEWAL

As we move toward Indiana University's bicentennial, as we continue to pursue our enduring missions of education and research, we would do well to keep in mind Goethe's caution that "we must always change, renew, rejuvenate ourselves; otherwise we harden."

This year is the 40th anniversary of the creation by the Board of Trustees in 1967 of the title of "distinguished professor." This title has been conferred sparingly by the president, with the approval of the board, on some of our most outstanding faculty. Last year, for example, Doug Hofstadter, Bernice Pescosolido, and Emilio Moran were all appointed distinguished professors. We shall be hearing from Doug and Bernice later.

Tonight I want to announce that I will be taking steps to rejuvenate this title. This afternoon, at the meeting of the Council of Deans, I asked the deans to actively seek out nominations of their best faculty who are most worthy of this title. I will also call for nominations more broadly throughout the university.

This title will be conferred on no more than four faculty a year who will be recommended to me by the University Distinguished Professors Committee. In the future, distinguished professors will receive base salary increases and research support funding more in line with that of other titled professorships.

My office will be working with the Alliance, the University Distinguished Professors Committee, the provost, chancellors, and the deans to formulate additional recommendations designed to ensure the title of distinguished professor remains one of our most prestigious.

I have taken two other initiatives to both elevate and recognize academic excellence. First, Laurie and I hosted last month the inaugural Academic Excellence dinner, an event which will be held annually to honor all Indiana University faculty, past and

present, who are members of the National Academies, or the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, or who are Nobel Laureates or Pulitzer Prize winners.

Second, I announced on Friday the inaugural Presidential Lecture. This year, the lecture will be held at 3 p.m. on Monday, October 15th. It is to be given by Professor Saul Kripke, arguably the greatest living philosopher and logician. The title of Professor Kripke's lecture is "The Collapse of the Hilbert Program." Future Presidential Lectures will be given by people of similar stature.

5. CONCLUSION

I conclude my remarks to you this evening with some words from the great mathematician about whom Saul Kripke will speak. In a lecture delivered in 1900 before the International Congress of Mathematicians David Hilbert, asked: "Who among us would not be glad to lift the veil behind which the future lies hidden, to cast a glance at the next advances of [academic research] and at the secrets of its development in future centuries?"

The problems investigated by the scientists, scholars, and artists in this room have shaped the development of their disciplines over the course of the last several decades. I am honored to be allied with you, the intellectual leadership of Indiana University, as we also look to the future and as we work together to usher in a new era of excellence in teaching, research, and creative activity and Indiana University.